

A Critical Reconstruction of Caring Acts between Korean Mothers and Children during Their Play Activities

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Abstract

In order to understand the mother-child relationship, care is important. Caring acts can be actualized when two subjects—the cared-for and the one-caring—interact. To contribute to understanding the ways in which caring actions can be identified by both child and mother during their play activities, this qualitative study examines Korean mother-child play interactions from a critical perspective through the basis on the typology of caring acts (Korth, 2003). For this purpose, two Korean mother-child dyads who are living in the U.S. were recruited. Observations of play activities of the two mother-child dyads and face-to-face in-depth individual interviews with two mothers were conducted for seven months. The results suggest that Korean mother-child caring relationships may be reciprocated through the child's active engagement in the caring relations as well as the mother's. Implications for early childhood scholars and professionals working with diverse families are discussed, as well as future directions for research.

Key words : mother-child interaction, play, care-in-action, critical qualitative research

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Introduction

Care is important in mother-child dyadic relations, in which mothers play a primary role as care-givers responsible for the growth and well-being of their children, and children are care-receivers but also have responsibilities for maintaining the relationship (Noddings, 2013). Thus, care emerges as a communicative act in that it connects the participants and affects how they relate to each other (Korth, 2003). Because children spend most of their waking time playing, their interactions with mothers occur largely during play activities, in which both members of the dyad take part. Children's play interactions with their mothers are closely linked to the environments in which their play activities occur (Faver, Kim, & Lee, 1995) as well as to their mothers' cultural backgrounds. For example, according to the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2017), there is an increasing population of preschool-age children with non-native English speaking Korean mothers in the US, and they may have experienced different mother-child dyadic interactions during their play activities from those experienced by their American peers. However, even though the number of Korean families with preschool-aged children residing in the US is consistently increasing, there has been little investigation of the caring acts of Korean mother-child dyads during play activities. By contributing to a deeper understanding of caring acts performed by Korean mother-child dyads, such research might not only enhance early childhood education (ECE) practices and pedagogies in US preschools with regard to serving Korean-heritage children but also provide a methodology for examining other cross-cultural studies of mother-child roles in caring interactions.

In this study, by looking at the ways in which Korean mothers interact with their children during play activities, the researcher describes and analyzes the caring actions of children for their mothers and of mothers for their children based on a typology of caring acts (Korth, 2003). With this analysis the researcher hopes to provide a useful resource and support for ECE stakeholders, including children, parents, teachers, educators, and policymakers, by expanding understanding of how caring actions are identified by Korean children and their Korean mothers.

Literature Review

The Theories of Care and Caring

Care is important in itself (Noddings, 2013). As human beings, we want to care and to feel cared for. In the case of children, care is not only important but essential for healthy survival. The caring relation comprises the *one-caring* and the *cared-for* (Noddings, 2013). Within a family, the one-caring is usually the mother as a primary caregiver, and the cared-for is usually the child. Thus, understanding the concept of care can provide a rich and insightful perspective on mother-child relations.

McMullen and McCormick (2016) describe the notion of caring as “a complex intellectual and emotional act, requiring both cognitive and affective mindfulness on the part of the caregiver” (p. 272). According to Mayeroff (1971) and Noddings (2013), a caring relation includes certain key features. First, the purpose of caring is to help others grow and to actualize themselves, and therefore, Mayeroff (1971) states, it involves “... first, caring for people other than myself, and second, caring for myself ...” (p. 53). However, to be meaningful, the caring relationship should be two-way, as the parent needs the child just as the child needs the parent. Each contributes to the role and fulfillment of the other, which is at the heart of the special significance of the parent-child relationship. To carry out the role of the one responsible for the growth and the well-being of the other, the parent needs the child to assume appropriate responsibility in the relationship. Mutual care-giving, no matter how the weight of responsibility is distributed, can become “contagious” (Mayeroff, 1971, p. 47). In the case of friendship, for example, caring is mutually reinforcing; my caring for the other helps stimulate her caring for me, and similarly, her caring further stimulates my caring. Relationships in which caring is not reciprocated, as in the case of an indifferent or incapable member, usually suffer and may fail. Thus, in a sound, mutually satisfying parent-child relationship, the roles of the one-caring and the cared-for are contingent upon one another.

Mother-Child Play Interactions

Mother-child relations, particularly maternal roles in children's play, have been a topic of interest for psychologists since the late 20th century (Belsky & de Haan, 2011; Hartup, 1989). How mothers communicate verbally and behave non-verbally with the children during their play activities are regarded as critical to children's development and growth (Jwa & Frost, 2003). While these actions have universal aspects, they are highly subject to social and cultural influences.

Given the increase in the U.S. population of immigrant families with preschool-age children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), understanding mother-child interactions during their play activities in the context of the cultural circumstances of families is crucial for ECE stakeholders because children's play behaviors and interactions are closely related to the environment in which their play activities take place (Farver et al., 1995). These researchers found that both Korean- and Anglo-American adults' beliefs about the value of play and their children's play behaviors were associated with the parents' educational goals for their children. For instance, Anglo-American children, whose mothers believed that play is essential for children's development and learning, engaged in more pretend play than Korean-American children, whose mothers believed that play is only for entertainment and a break from the work of learning. In the same vein, Tudge, Lee, and Putnam (1998) also found that American children were more likely to engage in pretend play than Korean children, who were more likely to play with academic materials. Such studies suggest that children's play reflects both parent-child interactions and families' cultural values as well as the reciprocity between parents and children, which is reinforced by the family's cultural norms.

It can be reasonably assumed that one reason for this academic orientation in Korean children's play is the high value Korean parents' tend to place on formal schooling. Seth (2005) has accurately characterized Korean society's emphasis on education as a way of "achieving status and power" (p. 9), both for individuals striving for upward social mobility and for the nation establishing its position in the global economic structure. Korean mothers thus believe that one of their most important parental responsibilities is to provide the best educational opportunities they can afford to prepare their children to be

competitive in the future. Paradoxically, however, Korean mothers have also been found to view American preschools' emphasis on a play- and child-centered curriculum positively and prefer it to a teacher-centered approach that emphasizes children's academic preparation (Sohn & Wang, 2006). This preference calls attention to the need to understand how Korean mothers' construe caring in their own interactions with their children.

Research Questions

For deeper understanding of the reciprocal caring actions of Korean mother-child dyads, the researcher has investigated the ways in which Korean mothers interact with their children during their play activities and how caring actions can be identified by both children and mothers. Toward this end, the researcher has utilized Korth's (2003) typology of caring acts to critically observe and interpret the caring acts in Korean mother-child play interactions.

Method

Based on its exploratory and interpretative nature (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), this study employs qualitative methods to understand the caring actions of Korean mother-child interactions.

Participants

Two Korean mother-child dyads participated in this study. At the time of the study, the children were in the age group of 54 - 67 months (four and five years old) with an average of 60.5 months. All of the participants were recruited from Korean families living in the U.S. Midwest through the snowballing sampling procedure based on the researcher's personal network. Table 1 provides demographic information on the participants. All participants' names are pseudonyms.

Table 1. *Participants' Demographic Information (N=4)*

	Name (Age, gender)	Year of Residence in the US	Country of Birth	Other family members living together in the US	Note
1 Mother-Child Dyad	Teresa (30s ¹ , F)	9	Korea	Eli (Teresa's second son) Teresa's mother	Noah's father lives in Seoul, South Korea
	Noah (67months, M)	2	USA		
2 Mother-Child Dyad	Donna (38years, F)	5	Korea	Donna's husband	
	James (54months, M)	5	USA		

Note: ¹Teresa doesn't want to share her detailed age information.

Data Collection

Data were collected for seven months, from September 2016 to March 2017, through multiple sources: observations, interviews, and children's artifacts. For each dyad, two 60- to 90-minute observations were conducted and video-recorded with the mother's permission, and two 40- to 60-minute semi-structured interviews following observations were conducted with each mother to capture her experiences with and perspectives on her child's play activities at home. All interactions were conducted in Korean. The video- and audio-recorded data were transcribed verbatim, and the researcher translated the interview transcripts from Korean to English. To enhance the credibility of the study, the researcher conducted member checks with the participants (Creswell, 2007) to verify the accuracy of the transcriptions and interpretations.

Mother-child dyadic interactions in the children's library in the apartment complex where they lived were observed and video-recorded in order to learn how the mother communicated with her child while engaging in play activities. The location of their play activities was a large seating area, which was a favorite place for children to play. Observations of play activities lasted up to 60 minutes depending on the flow of the interactions. During the observations, the researcher kept detailed field notes on the ways in which the participants responded to each other.

The purpose of informal individual interviews was to obtain information on the mothers'

perspectives on their play activities with their children at home. The interviews lasted around 40 minutes to 60 minutes. The general guiding questions included (1) What was the last (or a memorable) play activity (or the memorable play activity) with your child like? (2) Where did you play with your child? (3) How long did you play with your child? (4) What did you do during play activities with your child? (5) What types of play activities are you and your child usually engaged in?

Conceptual Framework

Korth's (2003) typology of caring acts, which guided the researcher's interpretations of mother-child dyadic interactions during play activities, facilitated a critical approach to the study of care a "pragmatic-communicative construct" (Korth, 2003, p. 487). The typology of caring acts is composed of three integrative modes: Overt-explicit care-in-action, overt-implicit care-in-action, and covert-implicit care-in-action, each depending on the where the act falls on a continuum of overt-covert expression. This typology of caring acts was useful in gaining insights into Korean mother-child play interactions.

Data Analysis

The data sources for this study were observational field notes and transcripts, individual interview transcripts, and children's artifacts. These data were created as text documents and loaded into Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software program. the researcher began with open coding, which involved reviewing all data of each case carefully, looking for the parts related to caring acts, and establishing categories and themes using Korth's (2003) typology of caring acts.

Findings

The findings presented in this section are divided into three sections, each addressing one of the types of caring acts: overt-explicit care-in-action, overt-implicit care-in-action, and

covert-implicit care-in-action. Overarching themes, which emerged during the data analysis, are outlined and then described with illustrative excerpts of the mother and child interactions in their roles as the cared-for and the one-caring.

Overt-Explicit Care-in-Action

The mother's explicit care-in-action

In this study, the Korean mothers used three different kinds of activities to construct the overt-explicit care-in-action: praising the child's effort, showing concern about what the child felt, or doing something for/with the child. The following example demonstrates that last type of overt-explicit action.

Praising the child's effort. Excerpt #1 refers to an episode in which Noah drew a picture describing his and his younger brother's play activities at the playground and wrote his younger brother's name in English to identify him as a figure in the picture. Noah then asked his mother to check the accuracy of what he wrote because he was not confident when writing letters in English. At that time, Teresa felt a great responsibility, as the primary one-caring, for Noah's well-being as well as his academic learning, development, and growth. As an overt-explicit act of care, Teresa used praise to encourage Noah to become confident and to give him emotional support:

Excerpt #1.

Noah: *Hm* (drawing), G <gee>, I <ie>, O <oh>, *is it right?* (looking at his mom, looking at the paper again, and writing the letters on the paper) *Can I write it like this? I usually write it like that, in school* (holding the paper up, looking at his mom).

Teresa: *Wow, look at how good you are at writing!*

Noah: (putting down the paper, and writing something) G <gee>, I <ie>, O <oh> (writing these letters on the paper),

Showing concern about what the child felt. In Excerpt #2, Teresa interacted with Noah in an explicit, overt way by asking questions that would elicit what he was feeling as she felt responsible for monitoring his emotional status and providing emotional support:

Excerpt #2.

Noah: (drawing)

Teresa: *Where is **Noah**? **Noah**, what are you doing there?*

Noah: *I am going up the slide.*

Teresa: (craning her head momentarily to look at his picture while sitting on the chair) *are you going up the slide? Oh, I see. Is it the start of the slide, over there? [p] **Noah**? Why don't **Eli** and **Noah** have any eyes, nose, and lips? It seems like they are feeling blue, today. Is that true? The reason that there aren't any eyes, nose, and lips on you and **Eli**'s faces is due to you feeling blue? How would **Noah** in the picture feel?*

Noah: (keeping drawing) [p] *They are smiling.* [OC: Literal translation of what Noah said here is "They are doing the smiling." Here, we can see that Noah uses simple English words, not always in sentences]

Teresa: *Is it true? How well do they feel?*

Noah: *Like a hundred, like a million.*

Teresa: *How does **Eli** feel?*

Noah: ***Eli**, **Eli** is~ Hmm, **Eli** is tired.*

Teresa: *Is he tired? Then, is **Noah** also tired?*

Noah: (looking at his mom) *No, **Noah** is red like this. He is so energetic!*

Doing something for the child. In Excerpt #3 from the interview with Donna, she explicitly described how she showed care for her son, James, by doing what he wanted to do with him:

Excerpt #3.

Donna: *Whenever James wants to play with me, I always play with him, such as hide and seek, something like that, or like, "Tag." Recently, James learned how to play "Tag" from the preschool. You know, in order to play "Tag" we need at least three people. Then, his father is supposed to play with him. Even though we, me and his father, feel a little bit tired, you know, playing with kids like hide and seek or tag needs more physical energy which I don't have enough of, we are supposed to play with him until he doesn't want to. I feel like that's because my son is our only child or that's our parenting style—just do it for him, whatever he wants.*

The child's care-in-action

In this study, Korean children used three different kinds of activities to construct overt-explicit care-in-action: taking care of themselves, asking to pay attention to themselves, and doing something for their mothers.

Taking care of themselves. Excerpt #4 is from an episode in which Noah stopped playing with puzzles with his mother and changed his play activities to drawing pictures. At that time, explicitly stating what he intended to do, thus showing that he could care for himself.

Excerpt #4.

Noah: (looking at the paper) *oh, now, I'm really going to do what I want, drawing a picture of a square* (starting drawing something).

Drawing attention to themselves. In addition, children often cared for themselves by saying "look at me." In the examples below, both Noah and Donna's son, James, overtly asked their mothers to look at them.

Excerpt #5.

Noah: (holding a sheet of paper up, looking at his mom) *Look at me. It looks like, like this! You should do like this. On this part, I will draw like that. I'm going to draw a picture of a slide! I'm going to draw a picture of the slide, and the slide...* (Putting down the paper)

In Excerpt 6, Donna described a time when James monopolized her attention, which he considered it his prerogative to claim:

Excerpt #6.

Donna: *You know, it was really hard for me to be pulled by him for four and five hours. Always he was calling me. For instance, when he wanted to play with Legos, I always should be with him. When I wanted to study English and was reading the book, he asked me to play with him, like "why do you build nothing? You are doing nothing, now." This is his style. This was his style. I think that he used to say things like that and used to want to play with me.*

Doing something for their mothers. Lastly, Noah could care for his mother as well as for himself. In Excerpt #7, Teresa asked Noah to color a picture with pink, a color she liked and he did not. But even though he wanted to use only the color blue, which he liked, he

said “I will make it for you” and compromised by coloring with both blue and pink, an explicit act of caring her.

Excerpt #7.

Teresa: *Do you think that blue is great? Do you mind if you color a picture in pink crayons?*

Noah: (in a low voice) *I hate pink.*

Teresa: *Why? I like the color pink. I'll be really grateful if you could color the picture with a little pink.*

Noah: *It looks nice together, blue and pink. It looks great.*

Teresa: *Really? Then, let's paint a picture with the color pink which I like.*

Noah: (coloring) *I will make it for you.*

Teresa: (placing the crayon box in front of herself) *Let's try to find the color hot pink?*

Noah: (looking at his mom) *Where is it?*

Teresa: *I think this color is pretty (picking a crayon).*

Noah: Red.

Teresa: *It is not red, isn't it hot pink? (finding another)*

Noah: (coloring) *This is pink...*

Teresa: (looking at his picture) *Why? It looks nice as well as blue.*

Noah: *yes... (in a small voice)*

Teresa: *No?*

Noah: *I like mixing with this color.*

Overt-Implicit Care-in-Action

The mother's care-in-action

In this study, Korean mothers used two similar kinds of activities to construct overt-implicit care-in-action: supporting the child's academic learning and supporting the child's development and growth.

Supporting the child's academic learning. Excerpt #8 is from an episode in which Noah wanted to write the letters in “Pop See Ko,” the name of a children's education program that he heard about at his preschool and in which he showed interest by singing the words. Seizing the educational moment, instead of writing the syllables for him, Teresa guided him to sound out letters and discussing them with him. In this way, she was

implicitly acting out care by encouraging him to make letter-sound connections himself so he would learn rather than just showing him how to write the program's name.

Excerpt #8.

Noah: (smiling, and looking at his mom) *Let's try to write **Pop! See! Ko!** (with a staccato touch).*

Teresa: *What is **Pop See Ko**?*

Noah: (humming the word) **Pop See Ko**, *seek, seek, is it a f<ef> or c<si>?*

Teresa: S<es>!

Noah: S<es>!

Teresa: E<ee>

Noah: E<ee>!

Teresa: E~~<ee>

Noah: E~~<ee>

Teresa: *If the pronunciation of e is long, then there are two letters of E<ee>. C<si>. A<a>.*

Noah: *Are there two letters of e?*

Teresa: *Yes. E~<ee>. **See, Ko!***

Noah: C<si>?

Teresa: *No, it is not C<si>. K<kei>. **Pop See Ko**.*

Noah: *I see. K<kei>.*

Teresa: Ko-o-ou, **Pop See Ko!**

Noah: *What is **Ko**?*

Teresa: Ou

Noah: Ou!

Teresa: *I think, is it a one? Is it Ko or Koo? Is it short or long?*

Noah: *It is long!*

Teresa: **Pop See Ko** (with a staccato touch)! *I think there is one.*

Supporting the child's development and growth. In Excerpt #9 below, Donna explicitly expressed that while playing with James she wanted to give him lots of opportunities to lead the activities because he could not take the lead when playing with his peers. Thus, Donna also used play activities in order to indirectly support her child's development and growth by following his directives so he could experience being the leader:

Excerpt #9.

Donna: *Just, I played his favorite [games], such as pretend. On the mattress, it was the boat. It was for fishing. He brought a stick and acted like fishing, or his father brought the quilt*

and spread it and they said it was a boat.

Researcher: *At that time, what did you do?*

Donna: *Just kept sitting down, I did like what he said. For instance, he said take off my shoes, and then I took off my shoes, and he told me to sit down and then I sat down. But actually I did this intentionally because my son cannot lead the play, whether he plays with Korean peers or American peers, he's just being dragged around by peers. I was also like this when I was a child at his age when playing with my peers, but I don't want that for him. So, I hope that my son does not act like me, but I don't know. It seems like it is due to his natural personality. So, I want him to lead at least when he plays at home. I just want to give him lots of opportunities to lead the play.*

The child's care-in-action

In this study, Korean children used one action to construct the overt-implicit care-in-action: reaching an agreement.

Reaching an agreement. In Excerpt #7 above, Noah explicitly demonstrated overt-explicit care-in-action by saying “I will make it for you,” and then finding a solution that could fulfill both what he wanted and what his mother wanted. By using both pink and blue in the picture, he reached an agreement with her, implicitly showing care by trying to deliver what she wanted from him.

Covert-Implicit Care-in-Action

The mother's care-in-action

The Korean mothers constructed covert-implicit care-in-action by showing an interest in the child.

Showing interest in the child. As mentioned above, the children overtly claimed their mother's attention for themselves, in response to which their mothers implicitly showed care for their request by showing interest in them. As shown in Excerpt #10, Teresa conveyed her interest in Noah by asking questions about his picture: “who is that?” and “where is Noah?”

Excerpt #10.

Noah: (holding the paper up, looking at his mom) *Look at me. It looks like, like this! You should do like this. At this part, I will draw like that. I'm going to draw a picture of a slide! I'm going to draw a picture of the slide, and the slide...* (putting down the paper)

Teresa: *Who goes down the slide? Who does?*

Noah: (drawing)...

Teresa: Who is that? [OC: She speaks in simple English sentences]

Noah: (stopping drawing, and looking at his mom) *Do you know who this is?*

Teresa: **Eli!** [OC: Eli is Noah's younger brother]

Noah: *That's correct. Eli.* (starting drawing) *Upside down. Eli is sliding upside down.*

Teresa: *Is Eli sliding upside down? Where is Noah?*

The child's care-in-action

In this study, the Korean children constructed covert-implicit care-in-action by worrying about what the mother felt.

Being concerned about what the mother felt. As mentioned above, the mothers showed concern about their children's feelings in an explicit, overt way. On the other hand, children tended to show concern about their mother's feelings in an implicit, covert way. In Excerpt #2 above, when Teresa asked about Noah's feelings, he picked up the cue that she was worried and said "Noah is red like this. He is so energetic," implying that he wanted to allay her concerns about himself. By making the subjective claim that he felt great, he implicitly reassured his mother that she need not worry about him.

Discussion

In a mother-child caring relationship, the one-caring feels responsible for supporting the growth and the well-being of the cared-for, and at the same time, the cared-for is also responsible for this relationship (Noddings, 2013) by enacting the three types of care-in-action. That is, the relationship becomes reciprocal through the child's active engagement in the caring relations as well as the mother's. The caring can become "contagious" (Mayeroff, 1971, p. 53) as each partner's caring evokes caring from the other. In this way,

caring is a shared activity that creates and supports a bond between the parties in the relationship.

During their play interactions, the Korean mothers tried to support their children's academic learning, development, and growth, suggesting that they believed that children can learn and develop through play activities, and that play is essential for children's development and learning. The finding that Korean mothers acknowledged play to be a significant vehicle for their children's learning and development differs from other studies suggesting that Korean mothers were more likely than Anglo-American mothers to consider academics as more important than play and to devalue play as a beneficial medium for children's learning (Farver & Lee-Shin, 2000; Farver et al., 1995; Tudge et al., 1998). This positive perspective on children's play may be a part of the mothers' process of acculturation to US culture.

Similarly, the use of maternal overt expressions of praise and encouragement may be influenced by the cultural context (Jose & Bellamy, 2012). In this study, the Korean mothers often used overt praise and encouragement to express care for their children, which are positively valued behaviors in the US (Cheah, Leung, & Zhou, 2013), in addition to implicit expressions of care. This finding differs from Oh and colleagues' (2002) argument that Korean mothers tend to praise their children less than Australian mothers. This overt expression of praise and encouragement may also be related to the mothers' levels of American acculturation.

It is important to note that children can be not only the cared-for but also the one-caring, a role they assume naturally in healthy caring children. The Korean children in this study tried to support their mothers' well-being by fulfilling their mothers' wishes and being concerned about their feelings. At the same time, they cared for themselves and maintained the reciprocity in the relationship by asking their mothers to do what they wanted. The findings of this study thus add another layer of understanding of children's caring acts and encourage ECE stakeholders to respect children as active agents who can care as well as be cared for, an important part of their socialization and self-actualization.

Also, these Korean mothers and their children drew on the typology of caring acts in similar ways. Both Korean mothers were overtly concerned about their children's feelings whereas their children implicitly expressed concern for their through their behaviors. In

addition, Korean mothers responded in both covert-implicit ways and in overt-explicit ways to children's overt-explicit care-in-action. For instance, when the child explicitly asked his mother to pay attention to him, she implicitly showed interest in her child by explicitly praising the child's effort. As Korth (2003) observes, care is meaningful action, indicating that caregivers "DO" (p. 496), through acts, language and thought.

This study had some limitations. First, given the use of qualitative methods with a relatively small sample of participants, as with any qualitative study, findings cannot be generalized to other Korean mother-child caring acts or to caring acts in general. However, generalizability was not the intention in this study, which was a preliminary exploration of using Korth's typology to examine the caring acts between Korean mothers and their children living in the U.S. and lead to further research into ways to support mothers and children in cross-cultural situations. Follow-up research with balanced children's genders and a broader age range is recommended.

Finally, the researcher hopes this study can help dispel the perception that in mother-child caring, mothers should be the only one-caring and children the only cared-for. By offering a more accurate and in-depth description of mother-child play activities, this study encourages early childhood professionals and practitioners to see beyond the stereotypical understanding of care and realize that even young children can and do provide care and do their part in sustaining caring relationships.

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Appendix I.
Transcription KEY

[p] A pause taken in conversation
... Indicates participant did not complete thought or changed direction mid-sentence
[OC:...] Observation Comments, interpretive notes (taken in field)
() Description of the participant's behaviors

Word: Korean word translated into English by the researcher (in this script)

Word: English word (English is a foreign language for the participant, in this script)

Bold: Formal name of referenced or addressed person

< > English alphabet transcribed as it sounds

Normal font: not verbatim speech

Italicized font: verbatim transcription